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Working-class consciousness and connections to place in the work of Rancid

ABSTRACT

Karl Marx once wrote that 'men [sic] make their own history but they do not make it in the circumstances of their own choosing'. This article studies the lyrics of the widely respected Californian punk band Rancid. With the Marx quote in mind, the expectation is that Rancid will address the social and political conditions of the (post-)modern, post-communist world whilst retaining some of the left-wing, quasi-Marxist radicalism that is now an established part of the punk rock ethos (neo-Nazi bands aside). It is argued that Rancid has an 'emotive proletariat spirit' that identifies with San Francisco's East Bay region as a place of working-class, oppositional 'otherness', and with a globalized proletariat exploited by global capital and authoritarian regimes (see Rancid's songs on Africa and China). The band critically examines aspects of life in quasi-communist countries such as China and Cuba in a manner that is devoid of much of the romanticizing of Third World Communism present in Joe Strummer of the Clash's earlier punk world-view and mythology. Consistent with the present age, there is no expectation in Rancid of any future utopian socialist society and this point also distinguishes Rancid from the Clash, with whom they have frequently been compared.

KEYWORDS

Californian punk
the Clash
Communism
Existentialism
Marxism
punk rock
Rancid
Joe Strummer

1. Important Brisbane (Queensland) punk songs critical of the Bjelke-Petersen regime include 'Brisbane (Security City)' (1978) by the Saints and 'Pig City' (1983) by the Parameters. The Stranglers also released a single 'Nuclear Device (The Wizard of Aus)' (1979) about the government of Bjelke-Petersen.

Strummer and Jones [had a] lasting interest in black forms, particularly reggae, and, in the deeper sense, ... [they had a lasting] interest in uniting, finding a rapprochement between, not only black and white musical forms, but also *black and white working-class consciousness*.

(Broe 2004: 156, emphasis added)

INTRODUCTION

Popular culture has often been a source of encouragement, empowerment, and resistance for those exposed to the harshness of the free market and the capitalist mode of production. Although British punk first came to prominence during the late James Callaghan's Labour Government, punk rock music has been perceived as playing an important oppositional role during periods of conservative political hegemony such as the Margaret Thatcher era in the United Kingdom (1979–1990) and the Joh Bjelke-Petersen era in Queensland, Australia (1968–1987).¹ Punk has been traditionally perceived as the most overtly political of all musical genres. Schalit writes about left-wing punk pioneers the Clash that the band 'inspired British punk to develop one of the most politically sophisticated critiques of American imperialism to have ever surfaced in rock 'n' roll' (2004: 213). However, the mid-1990s witnessed an explosion of platinum-selling, commercially successful young bands from the United States that self-consciously traded on the legitimacy and authenticity of the 'punk rock' signifier but dealt with lyrical themes of a largely interpersonal nature. The music was extremely 'poppish' and a new genre name 'pop-punk' was coined for these bands (Bestley 2013). Had the punk rock music scene died a natural death with commercial forces rendering this great counter-cultural movement a caricature of its former self and simply another vehicle for capital accumulation? Or does the original counter-hegemonic ethos of punk live on in some of today's most important bands even if the message is less quasi-Marxist than was the case previously?

To begin to address these questions this article studies song material from the widely respected Californian punk band Rancid, arguably the most important punk, as opposed to pop-punk or hardcore punk, band of the second half of the 1990s and 2000s. Discussion is restricted to songs released by Rancid for the first time in 2000 and subsequent years. This article also explores Rancid's connection to place.

The remainder of this article is structured as follows. Section 2 provides a brief introduction to the 1990s punk revival. Section 3 explores the idea of transcendence and control within Rancid's music; Section 4 discusses three Rancid songs, 'East Bay Night', 'Golden Gate Fields' and 'Rwanda'; while Section 5 concludes.

THE 1990S PUNK REVIVAL

The 1990s punk revival, after lean years for mainstream punk (as opposed to hardcore punk) in the mid- to late 1980s, is often referred to as 'the punk revival' or 'the second wave of punk'. The Californian scene, the spiritual centre for the 1990s punk revival, reached its peak of popularity in the years 1994–1996. Rancid and NOFX are two of the Californian bands from that era who have kept much of their original fan base since the end of the scene's glory years. However, there had been an emerging scene in Los Angeles (the 'SoCal' scene as it came to be termed, though that notation also served as shorthand for an earlier LA punk milieu) since at least the late 1980s and the

early 1990s. During this period, the ska-punk band, and an early incarnation of Rancid, Operation Ivy, released its *Energy* album (1989) and the Offspring released its self-titled debut album (1989) (Bertsch [1987] 2004: 179).

If the Sex Pistols' unexpected January 1978 break-up (signifying the 'death' of punk for many people; Savage 2005: 477) and Sid Vicious' literal death produced shock, disappointment, and a feeling of incompleteness, the 1990s Californian bands were able to, in the words of cultural theorist Slavoj Žižek (2008a: 81–82), retroactively retrieve and redeem the past by filling in the present and working towards the future.

Towards the tail end of the 1990s NOFX and Rancid were joined as scene figureheads by the Dropkick Murphys (hereafter 'the Murphys') from Dorchester/Quincy in the Boston metropolitan area, Massachusetts, United States. In Murphys' songs there is a generalized sympathy for the oppressed that could be viewed as quasi-Marxist or simply as humanitarian (or even as Roman Catholic). However, this sympathy for the oppressed is balanced by repeated calls for personal responsibility and treatises against the 'victimhood' mentality (as in songs 'Echoes on A Street', 'Loyal to No One', 'Tomorrow's Industry', 'Vices and Virtues' and 'Walk Away'). This is an aspect of the Murphys that is not directly replicated in Rancid.

The Murphys and Rancid both feature working-class consciousness but, in a departure from the world-view of Joe Strummer, there are no visions of an alternative socialist society of the future. Similarly, today's anarcho-punks 'are not interested in the detailed planning of a new [anarchist] society' (Dunn 2012: 216). About the Clash Bangs wrote that: 'You perceive that as much as this music seethes with rage and pain, it also champs at the bit of the present system of things, *lunging after some glimpse of a new and better world*' ([1987] 2004: 73, emphasis added). As Strummer said in *The Clash: Westway to the World* documentary (Letts, 2000): 'we were trying to grope in a socialist way for some kind of a future where the world is a less miserable place than it is' (cited in D'Ambrosio 2004a: 135, emphasis added). Whilst Strummer put his hopes in the revolutionary Sandinistas of Nicaragua, and Chile's Allende Government was still within recent memory, there are no similar high-profile revolutionary heroes in the world today. In the mid-1970s it still appeared as though revolution was just a breath away, at least somewhere in the world. Cherry and Mellins (2012: 14, fn. 8) mention that the original English punk music was 'resistance at a decisive sociopolitical moment' (as Jon Savage [2005] has explained at length).

In contrast to the mid-1970s left-wing radicals, the rioting Muslim youth in the outer suburbs of Paris today are impotent because all they can do is throw bricks, devoid of any theory (as Slavoj Žižek [2008c] argues in *Violence*). In the post-Soviet Union era, the hegemony of western-liberal democracy around the secular world can be viewed as all-encompassing. As Strummer stated: 'the climate of the times dictates the way people write' (cited in McKenna [2003] 2004: 241). One significant error in punk literature today is to 'deny the political', especially with respect to the Clash, by transposing today's global situation where 'communism is dead' onto the situation in the mid-1970s when revolution was potentially imminent, and communist ideas and theory still made sense to many.² This is a key issue in the present article because if we look for quasi-Marxism in Rancid we are implicitly arguing that it at least exists in the work of Rancid's most significant heroes the Clash (Terry Chimes excluded – Alex Ogg [2006: 140] cites Chimes' rejection of Strummer's *interpretation* of the Notting Hill Carnival riot as some 'significant event in history').

2. We recall journalist Caroline Coon's statement that the Pistols had the 'personal politics' whereas the Clash had the 'serious politics' or the 'real politics' (cited in James 2009: 129, fn. 1; Lydon et al. 1994: 108).

3. The source of Rancid's cheerfulness is the 'church' (i.e. the punk community) and other exotic proletarians rather than the 'world'.

We should perhaps note here the significance of Strummer's Marxist reading of history, rejected by Chimes, as something which progresses through inter-class tensions only to climax dialectically in the future victory of the (multi-ethnic) proletariat. Similarly, Strummer's quotes in Ogg (2006: 138) about not being politically inspired like 'John Reed and Ten Days that Shook the World' (Reed 2007) are disingenuous and prove little since Strummer here alludes to a classic book in communist history which few punks other than himself would have heard of. We also note the influence of the ideas of the intellectual Bernie Rhodes (Clash band manager) upon Strummer during the Clash years.

TRANSCENDENCE AND CONTROL

A theoretical framework that we should discuss briefly is derived from Walser's (1993a, 1993b) scholarly writings on transcendence and control within 1980s heavy-metal music. Walser (1993a, 1993b) argues that 1980s heavy-metal can be viewed as a synthesis of the dialectical opposites of transcendence and control. In Walser's analysis, control is achieved by the rock-solid heavy-metal rhythm sections of bassist and drummer that lock the listeners in through their steady beats and sheer power. Transcendence is achieved through the high-pitched operatic vocals of the lead vocalists of the period such as the late Ronnie James Dio, Judas Priest's Rob Halford, Iron Maiden's Bruce Dickinson and Helloween's Michael Kiske, and the solos of legendary guitar duos such as Thin Lizzy's Brian Robertson and Scott Gorham, Judas Priest's K. K. Downing and Glenn Tipton, and Iron Maiden's Dave Murray and Adrian Smith. The 'hair-metal' acts of the period introduced the lyrical theme of romantic love as another element that allowed transcendence (Walser 1993a, 1993b).

The concepts of transcendence and control are also relevant for punk but in punk it is very often through the lyrical themes that transcendence is achieved. Use of calmer ska/reggae songs and melodic vocal parts by Rancid and Irish traditional instruments by the Murphys also allow for transcendence directly through the music itself. It is argued here that Rancid has also lyrically sought transcendence in the experience of the 'other' in the face of a general backdrop of control, which is the alienation and oppression caused by global capitalism and authoritarian regimes. For Rancid, experience of the 'other' includes, especially, the loyal unconditional friendship of one's band-mates and friends and the warmth and humanity of women from non-western and non-capitalist countries. For example, on the 1995 song 'Olympia WA', from ... *And Out Come the Wolves*, the lyrics refer to meeting three Puerto Rican girls on the lonely streets of New York City, and in 'Radio Havana', on the *Rancid 2000* album, a Cuban female radio announcer's voice, speaking Spanish, emerges above the instrumentation mid-song. Armstrong's admission of loneliness in 'Olympia WA' and his dyslexia which he is unashamed of both testify to punk's 'aesthetic of imperfection' (McKay 2009: 359, cited in Pilkington 2012b: 326). The rapid-fire exchange of vocal parts by Armstrong and Frederiksen on songs such as 'Olympia WA' and 'Otherside' also testify to the transcendent power of friendship and shared experience. Fraser and Fuoto (2012: 148) refer to the exchange of vocal parts by Joy Division (although Gang of Four might have been a better reference point here) which helps the band create a 'chaotic effect that conveys the overwhelming onslaught of stimulation'. This is true in 'Olympia WA' as well but here the primary effect of the shared vocals is to suggest shared life experiences and mutual support. This is one area where Rancid's 'revivalist-punk' differs from the bleak despairing post-punk of Joy Division or Gang of Four.³

We notice two features of the Cuban female announcer's voice in 'Radio Havana': first its warmth, humanity and humility; and second its disembodied reverberating nature that we often associate with large and empty airport terminals (James and Kavanagh 2013: 61, fn. 4). The reverb leads to the last word, 'Rancid', echoing multiple times. The disembodied nature of the voice and the reverberation suggest America's alienation from Cuba and vice versa (James and Kavanagh 2013: 61, fn. 4). The voice also hints at Rancid's apparent belief in the warmth and sincerity of women raised in non-capitalist cultures which are forever perceived as 'other' in relation to the United States (James and Kavanagh 2013). The English translation of the Spanish words is as follows: 'Good Afternoon ladies and gentlemen, welcome to Radio Havana. Today in our program we welcome the most successful punk rock band from the United States, Rancid'. The non-western non-capitalist female is presented here as a partial resolution to the dehumanization and alienation created by Anglo-American capitalist society, a popular music theme that can be traced back at least as far as the Beatles' 'Back in the USSR' (1968).⁴ Pilkington (2012a: 261) refers to western musicians' continued 'fascination' with '[s]ocialist and post-socialist realities' even up until today. However, Rancid is obviously guilty not 'of being white' but of a certain romaniticization and fetishization of the 'exotic other' (at least in the cited lyrics from 'Olympia WA' and 'Radio Havana').

We should also note here that Rancid has made a continual effort to present a humanitarian, politically correct and G-rated (General Admission) image. By contrast, the side-project Lars Frederiksen and the Bastards' album *Viking* (2004) boasts about sex with prostitutes and has an inner booklet featuring colour pictures of Frederiksen taken with said prostitutes in various stages of undress. We can see here the Rancid band members making continued and strategic efforts not to 'soil their own bed' by keeping Rancid as socially aware, non-misogynistic and G-rated whilst letting side-projects Transplants and Lars Frederiksen and the Bastards pursue wilder themes of drug-dealing, prostitution and gangsterism in a more cavalier and less politically correct fashion. Therefore, the 'carefully crafted' (Bertsch [1987] 2004: 182) image can be seen to equate more to the brand name 'Rancid' than to the four musicians who today comprise it.

DISCUSSION OF RANCID SONGS

Introduction

A common theme, which runs through all of Rancid's material, is that oppression whether in Africa ('Rwanda' and 'Ivory Coast'), China ('Arrested in Shanghai') or the United States (the vast majority of the songs) usually is inflicted by corporations and/or authoritarian governments upon the poor and such oppression should be understood in the context of class struggle.

'East Bay Night'

The opening song from 2009's *Let the Dominoes Fall* is called 'East Bay Night'. In popular music the first song on an album is often a statement of vision, purpose and identity. This is especially the case for 'comeback' and 'reunion' albums and this was Rancid's first studio album for six years. It also featured a new drummer with Branden Steineckert (formerly of the Used) replacing long-term band member Brett Reed. 'East Bay Night' is a song about place, time, reflections, 'memory (social, collective and generational)' (Pilkington

4. Ogg (2012: 160, fn. 11) notes that 'Back in the USSR' was covered by Dead Kennedys and it appears on a posthumous live album.

5. More generally Pilkington (2012a: 261) talks about the use of 'East European iconography' (in most cases not literal iconography) by western pre-punk, punk and post-punk artists from Bowie's 'Warsaw' track to the Sex Pistols' reference to the Berlin Wall in 'Holidays in the Sun' (1977). However, Rotten's lyric was aimed at demystifying the citizens of East Berlin (while simultaneously rejoicing in a fascination with people within the communist mode of government).
6. <http://prophecywatcher.blogspot.com/2007/05/880-freeway-collapse-was-harbinger.html>, accessed 10 November 2009.
7. Lyrics can be accessed at <http://www.plyrics.com/lyrics/rancid/brixton.html>, accessed 5 February 2010.

2012a: 255) and working-class identification. The song dialectically opposes the East Bay area, on the eastern side of the San Francisco Bay, with the more cosmopolitan and elitist city of San Francisco proper on the western shore.

The East Bay is a working-class, unglamorous location, and not one visited by the conferencing set. Its principal city, Oakland, is also frequently referenced by Rancid. (The East Bay is generally regarded to include the cities of Oakland, Berkeley, Richmond, Concord, Hayward, Fremont, Livermore and Antioch.) In this song Rancid declares itself and its history to be proudly East Bay. The song describes, from the first person perspective, the narrator's own reflections on place and memory (Pilkington 2012a: 255). A key line in the song sets context: 'You can see the San Francisco Bay/Alcatraz over the landfill'. The now abandoned Alcatraz prison on the island in the bay, used as a functioning prison from 1934 to 1963, signifies the ruling-class' desire to order, categorize and to subjugate the working-class for the achievement of its own ends. However, the myth of Alcatraz has a variety of signifieds. One of these, important from the left-wing perspective, is that Alcatraz's economic failure as a prison suggests that humanity's ability to control the lives of human beings is always conditional, transitory, imperfect and incomplete. Alcatraz might then qualify as being what Barthes (2009) terms in *Mythologies* a 'left-wing myth' to be placed alongside other left-wing myths such as the Paris Commune, the October Revolution, Che Guevara and the Sandinista. Another left-wing myth today might be the nostalgia for the communist-era in certain post-communist punk bands located in the Eastern Bloc countries (Pilkington 2012a: 255).⁵

The somewhat cryptic references to: 'Earthquakes shake and fires take, from this view I've seen it all / I've tasted smoke as the hills burned / I heard the freeway fall' refer to the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake and the 2007 destruction of a section of freeway in the San Francisco-East Bay area. The second of these events was recounted as follows in a contemporaneous news report:

An elevated section of highway that funnels traffic from the San Francisco-Oakland Bay Bridge to a number of key freeways was destroyed early Sunday after flames from an overturned gasoline truck caused part of one overpass to collapse onto another. ... The sight of the soaring freeway twisted into a fractured mass of steel and concrete was reminiscent of that quake's damage [1989 Loma Prieta earthquake].

(*Prophecy Watcher*, 2007)⁶

That Armstrong can recall East Bay events dating as far back as 1989 adds authenticity to the song's narrative. The word 'another' as in 'another East Bay night' speaks of the repetitive nature of working-class life. Also interesting is the grammatical ambiguity: 'East Bay' can be seen as an adjective or as part of a longer noun. If viewed as an adjective, 'East Bay night' suggests a night of a particular (social) type or character. Viewing East Bay as an adjective is consistent with Rancid's clever use of the complex signifier 'Brixton' in adjective form in the song 'Brixton' on the 2007 *B Sides and C Sides* album of 'leftover' material. In that song Rancid refers to Oakland youth rioting against the poll tax and references a 'Brixton night' showing that Brixton has reached mythic status, doubtless through the influence of the Clash and songs such as 'Guns of Brixton', as an understood sign (a sign is a combination of a signifier and a signified) within global punk culture.⁷ Rancid shows that Brixton, used as an adjective, can be transported out of the United Kingdom and used to

signify *the sum of* a prevailing mood and a prevailing social, economic and political climate. Rancid is able to prove punk's universality here since, as Žižek writes, 'only by way of surviving ... transplantation can it [the movement] emerge as effectively universal' (2008b: 180).

The band began referencing the East Bay lyrically early on with the song 'Journey to the End of the East Bay' appearing on 1995's ... *And Out Come the Wolves*. That song describes Armstrong's former ska band Operation Ivy ('started in 87, ended in 89') and, specifically, band member Mattie leaving New Orleans to play with Operation Ivy in the East Bay. However, this part of the song is most likely fictionalized since Matt Freeman of both Operation Ivy and Rancid is from California. At first Mattie says 'this place is a Mecca' and Armstrong replies 'this ain't a Mecca, man, this place is fucked'. The young Mattie then fails existentially to meet a character-test by not being able to adapt to the hard life of the East Bay ('he had no home, he had no food'). Finally Mattie returns to New Orleans. The 'fucked' statement by Armstrong in this song appears to work contrary to the later mythologization of the East Bay until we consider that, in the 'negative dialectics' of punk culture, the East Bay may be mythologized because of, rather than despite, the fact that it is 'fucked'. Similar negative dialectics exist in numerous punk songs where working-class locales are romanticized.

Bestley (2012: 50–51, 55) explains that English punks, from London and the regions, frequently expressed complex and ambiguous sentiments about their home towns or districts often both expressing local positive pride⁸ in them and sarcastically belittling them for their boredom, lack of job opportunities, fascist attitudes and/or general narrow-mindedness. Pilkington (2012b) cites song lyrics of Vorkuta, Russian bands which testify proudly of their location in the country's deindustrializing and freezing north up past the 67th Parallel. Paul Weller of the Jam, on 'Sounds from the Street' (1977) almost apologizes for coming from the dull satellite town of Woking but denies being 'a fraud', claiming instead that his 'heart was in the city where it belonged'. O'Brien (2012) goes further than either Pilkington or Weller to argue that the feminist sounds of Leeds' student bands Gang of Four and Delta 5 in the early 1980s mirrored the depression and anxiety which were the result of the Yorkshire Ripper's reign of terror in the area. The thirteenth victim, Jacqueline Hill, had been a student in the English Department (O'Brien 2012: 34). As O'Brien (2012: 28) writes, '[i]f post-punk was about articulating the true narrative of place, these groups were the sound of collective trauma'. O'Brien (2012: 29) also adroitly explains how the bands' sounds resonated with the stark and brutal modernist architecture of the Leeds University campus. Similarly, Fraser and Fuoto refer to Joy Division's 'persistent depiction and denunciation of Manchester's harsh post-industrial urban environment' and 'invocation of the chaotic mental life created by the metropolis' (2012: 151).

The present author has talked to groups of Jakarta street-punks (November 2012). One teenage punk, Agung, was directing traffic at a busy intersection on Jalan Mangga Besar for small tips (this is not an illegal activity in Indonesia). This was Agung's *literal physical turf* (almost his '53rd and 3rd' although he was not a rent boy as far as the author was aware). The back-patches on Agung's sleeveless battle-vest included the Casualties and Bandung (Indonesia) street-punk band Tcukimay.⁹ As Perasovi (2012: 289) says, it is the critically despised bands such as the Exploited and the Casualties who have been most important in inspiring the development of punk scenes overseas and these two remain by far the most popular western punk bands in Indonesia. The

8. Punk records to have honoured the local soccer team include Resistance 77's 'You Reds' single (1984), in honour of Nottingham Forest, and Cockney Rejects' 'I'm Forever Blowing Bubbles' single (1980) in honour of, of course, West Ham United (Bestley 2012: 51). PerasoviD (2012: 285) refers to the well-known links between Cockney Rejects' band members and West Ham United's Inter-City Firm (ICF) also discussed in the book by ICF lead member Cass Pennant (Pennant 2003, Chapter 6).
9. According to the band members of Tcukimay, their band name means something akin to 'fuck your mother' in Sundanese which is the marketplace language of Bandung (Tcukimay 2012). Use of Sundanese can be seen as social comment relating to the hegemony of both Jakarta and the Bahasa Indonesia language project in Indonesia's social, political, economic and cultural life.

Jakarta street-punks can be characterized by Pilkington's concluding observation that "'everyday life" and "subcultural life" are profoundly connected and the relationship between them experienced and shared through contemporary forms of punk performance' (2012b: 340).

Rancid also acknowledges the importance of family. Armstrong refers to his grandma's house on the East Bay, which brings to mind Mick Jones of the Clash living with his grandmother in the West London tower block, 111 Wilmcote House, just off the Harrow Road on the Warwick Estate, in 1974 (Gilbert 2004; James 2009). An online source comments about Mick Jones and Wilmcote House as follows:

Mick Jones lived (on and off) with his grandmother on the 18th floor of this block of council flats from 1973 to 1980. It became an inspiration for several Clash songs, including London's Burning (which includes a reference to the flat's views over the scenic Westway motorway).

(http://scratchpad.wikia.com/wiki/Notting_Hill,
accessed 23 August 2011)

This quote also reaffirms punk rock's early associations with place. For his part, Armstrong establishes that his familial links to the East Bay are multigenerational, thus further increasing authenticity. East Bay identification provides a visual context, as well as a sociological context, for the rest of the *Dominoes* album. We also assert our belief that for this band self-conscious identification with the East Bay is a form of working-class consciousness. Therefore, the band is symbolically in agreement with Louis Althusser (2008: 80) that 'the class struggle is the motor of history'. In terms of the Clash, D'Ambrosio (2004b: 190) argues that Strummer's principal intention in the early song 'White Riot' was to exhort white working-class youth to recognize 'the need for class struggle'. For Rancid, the waters of the San Francisco Bay serve as a powerful visual symbol of the divide between the working class and the ruling class (to use the traditional terms of Marxist theory).

Connection to place can serve as an important anchor, in both psychological and sociological senses, to working-class identity in a society where 'bourgeois myths' (Barthes 2009) are subtle and reach into every aspect of social, economic and political life. The Clash's 1978 song 'Stay Free' was an exhortation by Mick Jones to his real-life childhood friend, Robin 'Banks' Crocker, to 'stay free' which did not mean only to stay out of prison (the literal, surface meaning) but also to 'live a working-class life and not adapt to other values ... [so as] to stay free' (Broe 2004: 164).

'Golden Gate Fields'

At the turn of the millennium Rancid released *Rancid 2000* album, an album of blistering hardcore punk, which has nearly all of the band's usual ska/reggae elements removed. Production on the album is deliberately harsh-sounding with the only relief and transcendence being offered through slowdowns of pace and melodic vocal parts. The album closer, 'GGF' or 'Golden Gate Fields', is particularly interesting and the lyrics of the second and third stanzas are reproduced here in full:

This is not Churchill Downs this is not Hollywood Park/
when the field is wide open/ I'll pick the horse that's got the biggest heart. Well they
rush the windows and play odds on fave/ (But the) My starter in 2nd

deuces down a bit of give and take/ Race is a puzzler when they open from the outside / It's a hit and run and they look back/ You can't count on that/ That's a fact/ The old men from El Cerrito/ Who talk about their picks/ And they talk about all the wins of the great jock Laffit Pincay/ This is not Churchill Downs this is not Hollywood Park/ When the field is wide open/ I'll pick the horse that's got the biggest heart.

[Vocal shifts over into spoken form here] Every time I come back to the East Bay I run into 'big L'/ My old friend Big L he's not doing so well/ Me and Big L grew up across the freeway from the track/ We spent many days at the track/ I see Big L come rolling-up the street/ On his little sister's pink ten speed/ He said 'Tim, Tim don't you remember me?' /'way back from 1973?'/ Every time I see him he has to remind me/ Like I would ever forget Big L/

Then he's gone/ Like a flash/ Then he's gone/ Like a flash/ Yeah like a flash/ Ok this is Rancid signing off for now/ until next time we'll see you guys later ... [lyrics are in the public realm through www.plyrics.com]

This song is evidently about horse racing (the first part of it at least) but this is used as a metaphor for the race of life. We are told at the beginning, with the slow, melodic, vocal lines suggesting an authority and authenticity based on personal experience, that 'this is not Churchill Downs/this is not Hollywood Park', a reference to two of the United States' most famous race tracks, in Kentucky and California, respectively. There is a clear statement as to what Rancid and the East Bay do not signify: they do not signify high-stakes, bourgeoisie, racetrack environments where only the best of the 'species' compete. By implication, Rancid also dissociates itself from the trendy pop-punk groups which are still part of the capitalist beauty contest world despite their (tenuous) connections to punk history and the punk ethos. However, the clever horse race imagery – reinforced by authentic knowledge of horse racing terminology and expressions such as 'odds-on' – does suggest that working-class life involves competition, deceit, tactics, rough-riding, setbacks and disappointments.

The use of the word 'this' as in 'this is not Churchill Downs' is intriguing. What or where is 'this'? The literal answer lies in the song's title of 'GGF' or 'Golden Gate Fields'. The Wikipedia entry for 'Golden Gate Fields' cites this song as the only (known) 'popular culture reference' to this racetrack.¹⁰ It is the East Bay location that is crucial. The YouTube official video for 'Last One to Die' shows the band in various East Bay locations including inside an empty Golden Gate Fields. A key line of the song sung slowly and authoritatively by Armstrong is: 'when the field is wide open/I'll pick the horse that's got the biggest heart'. Armstrong's statement here can be viewed as being *both* a normative statement of humanitarian values *and* a statement of belief that, in working-class life, the most compassionate and generous people in the long-run win the greatest respect and hence, to continue the horse racing analogy, come out at the front of the field.

Interestingly the formal song structure begins to break down halfway through on the delivery of the lyric: 'Every time I come back to the East Bay I run into "big L"'. The second half of the song describes Armstrong returning to the East Bay and meeting his aforementioned friend, and vowing that he will never forget him. As the song structure breaks down, Armstrong (who suffers from dyslexia¹¹) begins mumbling, and the guitars simply follow

10. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Golden_Gate_Fields, accessed 11 February 2010.
11. <http://richieb799.hubpages.com/hub/10-Famous-People-with-Dyslexia>, accessed 11 November 2013; http://members.tripod.com/mark_h_7/bio/armstrong.html, accessed 11 November 2013.

12. <http://archive.is/Lykul>, posted 14 September 2000, accessed 8 November 2013.
13. <http://www.allmusic.com/album/rancid-2000-mw0001965667>, accessed 8 November 2013.
14. This song is about the 2002 Ivorian Civil War.

Armstrong's vocals. Here we can view the second half of the song as a solution to issues raised in the first half: if humans seem to be like horsemeat on show in the competitive race of life then transcendence can be achieved by rejecting competitive values and embracing long-term friendships with those whom society chooses to reject.

'Rwanda'

The Rwandan genocide is certainly a difficult and sensitive subject matter for any band to tackle regardless of genre. The *Rolling Stone* album reviewer Matt Diehl describes the chorus, which opens this short song without any musical introduction, as a 'Cheap Trick' (pop-rock) chorus.¹² The Cheap Trick comparison is somewhat misleading because the production was, as mentioned, the harshest of any of the band's albums. The song could easily come across as patronizing and woefully insensitive in the hands of a less skilful and sincere band. By contrast, here the harsh guitars and gritty vocals lend credibility and authenticity to the message of solace being offered. The chorus is as follows: 'Rwanda, yeah your moon shines bright / Rwanda, over planned genocide / Rwanda, won't you be strong / like a lion'. Rick Anderson writes on AllMusic.com that: "'Rwanda" is a stutter-step anthem of sympathy for a devastated country' which is an excellent summation.¹³ Rancid refers Rwandans back to their own strength, dignity, and courage as African people, though Armstrong is at a loss to explain and comprehend the genocide and wanton destruction.

Rancid's commentary on Rwanda recalls Jean-Paul Sartre's (2006) writings on the Algerian War where he argued that France had lost its self-respect through its torture tactics in the war of liberation whereas the Algerian revolutionaries had retained theirs. Rwanda was internally divided into perpetrators and victims and some no doubt took on both these roles at various points. On the song 'Ivory Coast' on 2003's *Indestructible* album, Rancid refers cleverly to a 'civil war with no civil rights', with the band trading here on the adjective 'civil' taking on different meanings depending upon the noun it is paired with.¹⁴

Using Marxist terms, songs such as 'Stand Your Ground' and 'Rwanda', taken together, would suggest that Rancid has in view the notion of a global working-class exploited by global capital, authoritarian regimes, and tribal bullies settling real and imagined scores. The fact that the United States exhibited little interest in or concern for Rwanda during its genocide connects that country with the proletarian 'otherness' that Rancid elsewhere identifies with and revels in.

CONCLUSION

Marx wrote that 'men [*sic*] make their own history but they do not make it in the circumstances of their own choosing'. This article has studied some lyrics from the widely respected Californian punk rock band Rancid. I have argued that Rancid has an 'emotive proletariat spirit' (Myers 2006: 45) that identifies with San Francisco's East Bay region as a place of working-class oppositional 'otherness' and with a suffering globalized proletariat exploited by global capital and authoritarian regimes. The band critically examines aspects of life in quasi-communist countries such as China (2003's 'Arrested in Shanghai') and Cuba (2000's 'Radio Havana') in a manner that is devoid of much of the romanticizing of Third World Communism present in Joe Strummer's earlier punk world-view and mythology. However, and despite this, Rancid presents women from non-western and non-capitalist countries as offering a form of

transcendence (in 1995's 'Olympia WA' and 2000's 'Radio Havana'). Rancid has retained a G-rated and humanitarian lyrical approach (thus keeping its b(r)and name pure) while its members' side-project bands Transplants and Lars Frederiksen and the Bastards have unashamedly explored the seedier worlds of gangster-rap, prostitution, drug-dealing and misogyny. Consistent with the age in which Rancid operates, there is no expectation of any future utopian socialist society and this point also distinguishes Rancid from many of the 1970s English punks and especially from the Clash.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Alan Bradley, Susan P. Briggs, Lord Butche (vocalist of hardcore-punk /thrash-metal band The Cruel from Bandung, West Java, Indonesia), Bligh Grant, Matthew Haigh, Graham Hubbard, Sean Martin-Iverson, Alex Ogg (editor), Max Richter, Tony Tinker, Chris Tolliday and Rex Walsh for helpful comments. I also thank participants at *Migrant Security Conference*, University of Southern Queensland, Toowoomba, Australia, 15–16 July 2010, for insightful feedback on a related punk rock paper by the author.

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SUGGESTED CITATION

James, K. (2014), 'Working-class consciousness and connections to place in the work of Rancid', *Punk & Post-Punk*, 3: 3, pp. 243–255, doi: 10.1386/punk.3.3.243_1

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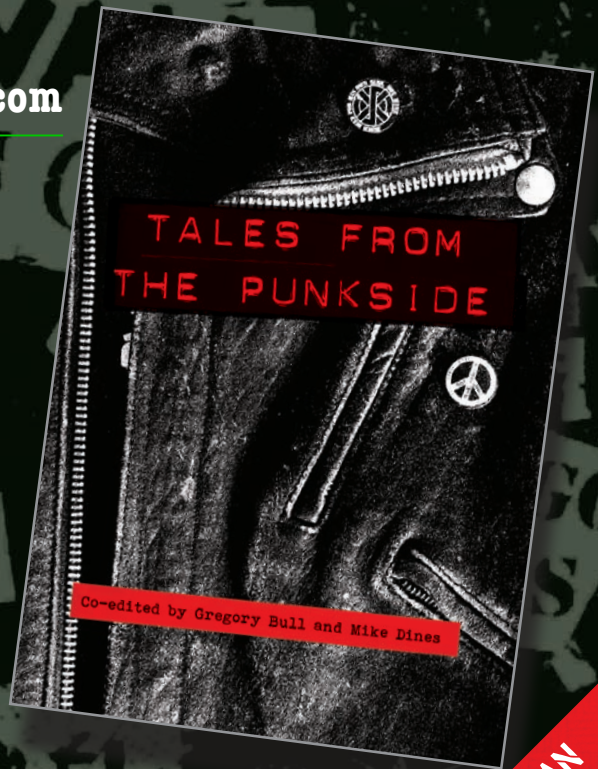
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